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Un-Haunted House : Spirits, Solid Citizens, and *Babbitt*

Russ Castronovo

1 After the American philosopher and psychologist William James got high from inhaling "laughing gas" or nitrous oxide, he gave some serious thought to mystical trances. Although he had trouble accepting the expansive claims made for occult experiences, there were nonetheless certain feelings that he was not ready to dismiss altogether. In the wake of his experiments with nitrous oxide, James saw how others could envision transcendent planes and celestial vistas. For the father of American psychology, mysticism afforded human consciousness an expanded perspective, which, even if proven to be false or illusory, still offered an alternative to this "ordinary naturalistic world."[1] Even if the "wider world" heralded by spirit mediums and other mystics is made up of both "valid experiences and counterfeit ones... it would be a wider world all the same."[2] The real was not fixed or singular but instead varied with subjects' conditions, whether they had their feet firmly planted on the ground or felt exhilarated by narcotic gas. Rather than rely on objectivity and discount paranormal experience, James adopts a more subjective stance, implying that mystical sensation has certain validity at an experiential level. Otherworldly insights may not be verifiable, but people's feelings about regions beyond this earthly plane are.

2 James's position toward the occult is more complex than that of a scientist committed to empirical observation. While his experience in adding "supersensuous meaning to the ordinary data of consciousness" is not an everyday occurrence, his observations are notable for not dismissing spiritualism and mysticism as mere hokum.[3] The paranormal may not be that distant from the normal ; the supernatural, from a certain perspective, looks a lot like the natural. By turning to Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel, *Babbitt*, this essay examines the continuum between the paranormal and the normal, the supernatural and the natural. In particular, the lesson of *Babbitt* reveals how the occult is absorbed under the aegis of the normal, the regular, the conventional. So while James wondered whether "mystical states" might enhance this "ordinary naturalistic world," Lewis's description of a séance conducted in Babbitt's home in the Midwestern U.S. suggests

that the potentially alternate reality glimpsed in trance or other spiritualist practice is readily brought into alignment with the singular reality of conventional middle-class existence.[4] In short, we might say that Babbitt's house in Zenith is spectacularly un-haunted, peopled neither by ghosts nor animated by the searching that their spectral apparition inspires.

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4 Extrapolating from his experience with nitrous oxide, James believed that once people accepted the possibility that other levels of consciousness could be opened up by chemical or spiritual means, the material matter of everyday life became potentially invested with new meanings. Encounters with this "wider world" might serve as a jumping off point for utopian musings, or as James more modestly put things, provide a glimpse of one of the "indispensable stages in our approach to the final fullness of the truth."[5] James's research and his commentary on "*other-worldly states of mind*" might not sound all that dissimilar to the ethereal babble spoken by Verena Tarrant, the heroine of his brother Henry's novel, *The Bostonians* (1886).[6] It certainly finds a Pan-African echo in the supernatural discourse of Pauline Hopkins's magazine novel, *Of One Blood, or, the Hidden Self* (1902-03), the subtitle of which invokes James's 1890 essay, "The Hidden Self." Earlier in the nineteenth-century, the wider perspective and new meanings associated with spiritualism and the occult held a distinctly political edge. In particular, mediums and others who claimed second-sight moved in reform circles animated by women's rights and antislavery activism. While trance speakers often peppered their visions of the spirit world with messages about radical equality and the erasure of all earthly hierarchies, American spiritualism in the pre-Civil War era also preached quiescence, rhapsodizing over a deathly political posture in which subjects became insensible to the commotions of the democratic political world.[7] As both *The Bostonians* and *Of One Blood* attest, interest in spiritualism in connection to the rights of women and African Americans remained a powerful subcurrent in Anglo-American letters of the fin-de-siècle era.

5 Other transatlantic literary figures exhibited varying degrees of interest in the occult. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle lent the heft of his reputation to the advancement of spiritualism. The same year that *Babbitt* was published, Doyle visited the United States as part of his self-appointed mission to serve as "the greatest propagandist the Spiritualist movement ever had."[8] At the start of the century, Frank Norris included a mystic seer who communes with the soul of his murdered love in *The Octopus* (1901). Jack London's novel of astral projection, *The Star Rover*, was published in 1915 and five years later it became a silent film. After the death of Henry James, his secretary used automatic writing to communicate with her dead employer and, in part, to continue his literary labors from beyond the grave. Upton Sinclair's wife was said to possess mediumistic powers, and the author recorded their joint experiences with telepathy and spirit mediums in *Mental Radio* (1930). Even that icon of the normative, Lewis's George Babbitt, can be found in 1922 holding hands with his dinner guests and joining a séance in his living room. All during this time and especially in Britain after the devastation of World War I, the occult remained a locus of radical energies, political as well as sexual. Its popular appeal gathered plebeian supporters and socialist sympathizers to its ranks even as its liminality encouraged swindlers and frauds.[9]

6 Spiritualism had always tended to the flighty and esoteric, and it is perhaps not a great leap from the séances at the People's Spiritualist Church of Los Angeles that Upton

Sinclair attended to the fascination in occult, paranormal, or other "unexplained" phenomena such as the Bermuda Triangle, UFOs, and Bigfoot that emerged later in the twentieth century. Each new mystery seemed at a fringe further than the last.

7 But spiritualism has also tended toward the normal. In its more regular incarnations as envisioned by Lewis, the occult serves not as a jumping off point for outré intimations about sexual equality or other utopian vision but rather as confirmation of a sober, outwardly consistent existence of the solid citizen. Lewis, in fact, considered "A SOLID CITIZEN" as an alternate title for his novel, although the title he eventually chose gave rise to such neologisms as "Babbittism," "Babbittry," or simply "Babbitt" to signify the self-complacence that comes with middle-class conventionality.[10] The scene from *Babbitt* that I want to examine reveals what happens when a solid citizen attends a séance and the spirits of the dead are asked to endorse prevailing cultural values.

8 Hardly original in any of his endeavors, Babbitt was not the first solid citizen to dabble in the spirit world. Spiritualism had long claimed a democratic ethos, which held that everyday people possessed mediumistic abilities to contact the departed. But fakes and quacks often seemed as widespread as true believers, and it became just as popular for newspapers to print exposés about bogus séances and staged ghostly presences as it was for spiritualist publications to provide evidence of mystical communication. Just as everyone had the potential to contact the spirits, anyone with a touch of commonsense had the ability to see through hoaxes. Advocates for spiritualism as well as its detractors each appealed to solid citizens, suggesting that normal, everyday men and women would see the truth of their cause.

9 For spiritualists, the enlistment of ordinary people to their side was an important part of the movement's avowedly non-hierarchical aspects ; as Jenny Hazelgrove notes, "Spiritualist deployment of the 'average man' could counter the hegemony of 'expert' culture."[11] Since the scientific establishment—James's experiments with nitrous oxide notwithstanding—often scoffed at the "evidence" of mystical experiences and occult phenomena, advancements in the field were especially reliant upon the activities of lay men and women. The introduction to Sinclair's *Mental Radio* makes exactly this argument, and in the book as a whole Sinclair adopts the position of an ordinary person who witnesses extraordinary happenings.

10 On the other side of the debate, doubters argued that plain men and women could readily discern that spiritualism was a scam. To evaluate the sights and sounds of levitating tables, floating tambourines, and ghostly manifestations, individuals need only judge these sorts of performances against the empirical bases of their day-to-day existence. They would quickly find that spiritualism was motivated by the crude materialism of frauds and swindlers interested, not in utopian visions, but in the money of bereaved parents and widows. While it may have been well and good for James to sample laughing gas, *The Menace of Spiritualism* (1920) advised readers to "shun" the occult "as they would cocaine."[12] According to this warning, spiritualism was a sort of collective hallucination, most likely manufactured by "the more militant section of the Women's Right Movement."[13] Clearly, though, this line of attack had its problems since the popularity of spiritualism in England and the United States, especially after the so-called Great War, indicated that people from all walks of life were flocking to séances and giving testimony about otherworldly communication. The explanation could only be that the "ordinary person who is 'convinced' of the truth of Spiritualistic claims is commonly so convinced by the simpler types of first-hand

evidence," which can easily be manipulated and exaggerated by the power of suggestion or sleight of hand.[14] Rather than being swayed by the dubious evidence of the "supernormal," people should confine themselves to the domain of the normal.

11 In the face of grief and a willingness to believe, people might delude themselves. Upton Sinclair admitted this possibility when he was visited by the ghostly presence of Jack London on July 16, 1930. Speaking through a medium, London had kind words for his friend : "when history is written fifty years from now, there will be only three living American writers who will be remembered, and Upton is one of them." Although Sinclair entertained the possibility that some of what the medium conveyed seemed to partake of London's idiom, he thought it more plausible that what sounded like London was really "Jack as the subconscious mind of Upton would have him !"[15] This view aligns with the conclusion of a 1920 assault upon spiritualism that the mystic truths spoken by spirits may be "really no more than the product of incarnate subliminal activities."[16] Occluded thoughts may manifest themselves in outward form as suggestions from the beyond of the spirit world, providing alternatives to customary patterns that ensured normalcy. Subjectivity, as Edgar Allan Poe darkly hinted a century earlier, might have some hidden recesses. If our apprehension of the real, as James hinted, varied in terms of a subject's condition (people could just as easily be in a mystic trance, under the effects of nitrous oxide, or feeling completely normal), then, it followed that inclinations, perversities, and other subconscious motivations might have some rather unconventional effects.

12 But in the town of Zenith, the fictional Midwestern setting for *Babbitt*, there seems to be little indication that the Chamber of Commerce or the Clan of Good Fellows is haunted by unconventionalities.

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14 The solid citizens of Babbitt's world have little inclination to seek out "a wider world," to recall James's phrase, different from the narrower one that they already know. In Babbitt's environment, there simply seems to be no space for "incarnate subliminal activity"—though Lewis's novel does explore the fantasies and rebellion of its title character. For Babbitt's friends and neighbors, however, the pursuit of the materialistic values wrapped up in new cars and real estate overrides any interest in the unseen truths claimed by the devotees of spiritualism. In Floral Heights, the subdivision where Babbitt makes his home, the houses all exhibit a regularity that echoes that of their inhabitants. No gothic garrets unsettle the landscape, and there is no reason to suspect that the town's poet laureate, T. Cholmendely Frink, who writes clever verses and advertising jingles for the newspaper, will ever switch gears to write something as introspective or disconcerting as Emily Dickinson's "One need not be a Chamber—to be Haunted." Zenith, above all, seems an eminently safe place to hold a séance.

15 At a dinner party one evening at Babbitt's house, the women propose that the guests "try and do some spiritualism and table-tipping."[17] They enlist the talents of Frink as a medium, intuitively making an association between literary sensibility and mystic forms of communication. The lights are darkened and a slight thrill is felt when the men take the hands of women who are not their wives. Raps on the table are heard. The spirit of Dante visits. On the whole, though, the séance is remarkable for being thoroughly unremarkable. Thus, the disembodied form of the Italian Renaissance poet only confirms the prevailing consensus that the sort of "practical literature" (122) churned out by Frink represents the highest aesthetic achievement.

16 But as Dante speaks of "the higher plane" (122), Babbitt starts to have some misgivings as though he is slowly admitting the possibility that the world may be wider than he has assumed. And he begins to wonder if the séance is more than a cute parlor game to pass the time. What if Frink's talent for spiritualism is an indication that there is more to Frink than meets the eye ? If Frink, a man Babbitt knows to be a faithful churchgoer and even more faithful consumer, has a secret side, then, the subjectivity of solid citizens might not be that solid after all. It is this train of thought that leads Babbitt to associate spiritualism and socialism, a connection he finds disturbing because of the radical tendencies he vaguely attributes to each movement. The real danger is not that Frink's self may have hidden recesses but that Babbitt may have them. If the middle-class parlor is haunted by Dante, if there is something to what seems to be spiritualist claptrap, if Frink is a closet radical, might Babbitt come to share Dickinson's discovery that "The Brain has Corridors" where we can encounter "Ourself behind ourself, concealed" ?[18] These suspicions have been lurking since before the start of the séance when Babbitt makes an admission about the dinner party conversation that startles himself : "Suddenly, without precedent, Babbitt was not merely bored but admitting that he was bored" (119). The startling thing is not that he confronts his discontent but that this honest self-examination arises without motivation and comes from nowhere. He thinks and acts "without precedent," which is to say that for an instant he lives without respect to social custom or behavioral routines. From this perspective, the séance begins to look potentially different : a solid citizen on the verge of private rebellion takes part in a practice vaguely inspired by spiritualism and socialism.

17 But it is potential that goes nowhere. As Babbitt falls back into his customary jocularity, as he returns to a self that he knows so well and is completely consistent with how others see him, the half-formed possibility of acting and thinking differently vanishes. For a moment during the séance he experiences, "without explanation, the impression of a slaggy cliff and on it, in silhouette against menacing clouds, a lone and austere figure" (123). Is this the mystic otherworld outlined by James ? Is this figure perhaps somehow analogous to the self behind the self that haunts Dickinson's poem ? Such searching questions stirred by the summoning of Dante's spirit are also effectively contained by Babbitt's own participation in the séance. The séance allows him to act normal : even before the lights are turned on, he is acting in accord with social expectations, reassuring the circle of his respect for proper gender relations and other behaviors. Most of all, Babbitt assures himself that he is haunted by no second self. There is no other "wider world," after all. A "wider world" in this case would be a cultural landscape broader than the narrow confines of American middle-class existence. But the séance gives Babbitt the opportunity to mock suggestions about widening his horizon, as he speaks to "old Dant'" (123) in a mishmash of foreign phrases, suggesting quite forcibly that the solid citizen needs only one idiom for describing the real. Before the airy immaterialities of the occult, Babbitt finds solace in the parlance of the solid citizen.

18 More than defensive mockery is involved when Babbitt, blending Italian, French, Spanish, and German, asks his neighbor-turned-medium to tell Dante, "*Buena giorna, senor, com sa va, wie geht's ?*" (123). It would be a mistake to see him as simply rejecting the séance since he finds it eminently a useful platform for turning the paranormal into the normal. This process, of course, mirrors the reining in of Babbitt's own excessive libidinal and social energies over the course of the novel. Babbitt's un-haunted house

becomes the space where the séance loses its radical potential. There are no ghosts—just as there are no socialists, feminists, or utopian dreamers. Likewise, there are no secret chambers to the self, and Babbitt strives to be the good husband and capable businessman that everything assumes he is. Nothing—not convention or precept or custom—dematerializes in a room of solid citizens. The social implications of a world, or simply a middle-class parlor in the Midwest, without haunting are stark : everyday existence proceeds uninterrupted, lacking any hint of other ways of configuring reality. The non-normal, we might say, does not have a ghost of a chance in a town full of solid citizens who believe in the one reality that keeps them safe.

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NOTES

1. William James, "Notes on Mysticism and Nitrous Oxide" in *Philosophy of Science and the Occult*, ed. Patrick Grim, Albany, State University Press of New York, 1982, 297.

2. James, 297.

3. James, 296.

4. James, 297.

5. James, 297

6. James, 294.

7. On these points, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits : Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston : Beacon, 1989) and Russ Castronovo, *Necro Citizenship : Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2001.

8. Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, London, Routledge, 1969, 159.

9. See Logie Barrow, "Socialism in Eternity : The Ideology of Plebian Spiritualists, 1853-1913" *History Workshop* 9 (Spring 1980), 37-69 ; Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society between the Wars*, Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2000 ; Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

10. Letter of Sinclair Lewis, July 21, 1921 in *From Main Street to Stockholm : The Letters of Sinclair Lewis, 1919-1930*, New York : Harcourt Brace, 1952, 77.

11. Hazelgrove, 21.

12. Bernard Vaughn, "Foreword," *The Menace of Spiritualism*, New York, Frederick A. Stokes, 1920, xii.

13. Elliott O'Donnell, *The Menace of Spiritualism,* 150.

14. Whatley Carington, *The Foundations of Spiritualism*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1920, 130-31.

15. Upton Sinclair, "Is This Jack London ?" in *The First Occult Review Reader*, ed. Bernhardt J. Hurwood, New York, Award Books, 1968, 23.

16. Carington, 134.

17. Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt*, New York, Signet, 1988, 121. All further references are to this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text.

18. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson, Boston, Back Bay Books, 1976, 333.

RÉSUMÉS

Par l'étude du roman *Babbitt* de Sinclair Lewis, publié en 1922, cet essai examine le continuum entre le paranormal et le normal, le surnaturel et le naturel. La morale de *Babbitt* révèle que l'occulte est placé sous l'égide du normal, de l'attendu, du conventionnel. En croisant le roman avec d'autres textes qui s'intéressent au spiritualisme au début du XXe siècle, nous pouvons voir comment une autre réalité potentielle entrevue pendant les transes, les séances ou d'autres pratiques spirites est immédiatement recadrée pour correspondre à la réalité singulière de l'existence conventionnelle de la classe moyenne. La maison de la classe moyenne est par conséquent impossible à hanter, résistante à l'idée que le « moi caché» a des recoins gothiques, pour paraphraser William James. Le résultat est que les attentes utopiques associées au

spiritualisme moderne sont congruentes avec la biographie du « bon citoyen», qui, soit dit en passant, était le titre de départ de *Babbitt*.

By considering Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel, *Babbitt*, this essay examines the continuum between the paranormal and the normal, the supernatural and the natural. The lesson of *Babbitt* reveals how the occult is absorbed under the aegis of the normal, the regular, the conventional. By reading the novel in conjunction with other texts about spiritualism written in the early twentieth century, we can see how the potentially alternate reality glimpsed in trances, séances, or other spiritualist practice is readily brought into alignment with the singular reality of conventional middle-class existence. The middle-class home is decidedly un-haunted, resistant to notions that the "hidden self," to borrow a phrase from William James, has any gothic recesses. The result is that the utopian longings associated with spiritualism are reconciled with the biography of the "solid citizen," which, incidentally, was the working title for *Babbitt*.

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